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so often proclaims the ingenuous Negro folk-singer a true poet:

Ef—yo' wanten go t' hebb'n

(Oh yes!)

I'll-a tell yo' how

(Oh yes!)

Jes' keep yo' han's on de Gospel plow

Want t' go t' hebb'n in de mo'n-in'!

Natalie Curtis

REVIEWS

MISS LOWELL ON TENDENCIES

Tendencies in Modern American Poetry, by Amy Lowell.
Macmillan Co.

It is a relief to have at last an absorbing book on the new movement in American poetry, a book by one who is in the movement and who is up to date in her point of view. Whether one agrees with Miss Lowell's opinions or not, no one can question her knowledge of the subject, and of the literature in English, French, and perhaps other languages which forms the historic and immediate background of the subject. She is trained, she is competent; and being herself a poet of high repute in the movement, she is sympathetic with its manifestations. Indeed, her attitude is one of enthusiasm and confidence; sighs for the past and apologies for the present are now definitely relegated to the limbo of old fashions.

But, competent and informed as Miss Lowell is, she has given us rather the book of a theorist than of a student

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open-minded and open-eyed. Theories are dangerous in either art or life. The man of science accumulates thousands of facts before he ventures on a theory, and unless his theory stands the test of every fact then or thereafter presented it goes upon the scrap-heap. In the fluidities of art and life, however, this scientific precision is difficult. The facts lack definite outline—each observer sees them differently. Conclusions thus tend to become merely the expression of an individual temperament or preference, and they are valuable according to the breadth and universality of the critic's intellectual horizon.

Miss Lowell has tried to formulate and systematize a wide and rather disorderly literary democracy by a running comment on the lives and works of six poets who, in her opinion, concentrate and express its "movement." Others, she seems to say in her introduction, may be interesting, even admirable, but they are less typical, being either on the edge of the main current, or outside of it in little pools or eddies of their own.

The book states the author's case but makes no effort to prove it. It is the opening argument of a law-suit, with the examination of six witnesses and the presentation of facts—the narrative part of her case. But nowhere does she gather her facts together, round up and discuss all possible cross-examinations and opposing arguments, and complete her case with a convincing appeal. One feels that here is an author of firm conviction, strong will, and intense imaginative enthusiasm, who thinks that American

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poetry either does, or ought to, follow a certain marked-off path; and that any American poetry which does not conform is thereby outside "the movement."

There is a curious familiarity in this attitude of mind. Miss Lowell is caught unaware by her Puritan inheritance—we have once more orthodoxy and heresy, once more a laying-down of the law. But the trouble is, the law won't stay laid.

What, for example, can be done with Vachel Lindsay? Miss Lowell tries to dispose of him in a sentence of the introduction as "rather popularizing the second stage of the movement"—the stage of Masters and Sandburg—"than heading a completely new tendency of his own." But, although no tendency whatever is completely new, Mr. Lindsay is no corollary of his Chicago confreres, and any discussion of American poetry which leaves him out is in danger of being discarded by the next age. If the thesis is not big enough to account for him, then the thesis has to be scrapped. Mr. Lindsay represents a tendency much richer and more indigenous than that personified by the imagists, for example, however fine and high theirs may be. His roots run deep into the past of American literature; Mark Twain and Riley and Brer-Rabbit Harris were his collateral relatives, and all the wild lore that is in our western blood—our love of the wilderness, the folk-sense of magic in nature and life, the instinct of sympathy with all kinds and races of men—all this is in Vachel Lindsay's tendency, and he carries a good share of the new movement

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on his shoulders. And more or less in the same group with him march poets like Benét, Miss Wyatt, Dr. Gordon, Miss Skinner, and a troop of youngsters, each of whom is inspired by some particular local or racial group of our myriad-minded country.

We will pass by the conservatives, the poets who conform, on the whole, to the elder tendencies, although any complete study of our subject would have to discuss and estimate values in the work of men and women like Arthur Ficke, Agnes Lee, Witter Bynner, Sara Teasdale and others.

But in presenting the claim of the radicals, Miss Lowell can not justly confine it to four poets. Her study of these four is on the whole sympathetic, though I should question many details. Mr. Masters' work, for example, springs out of a social experience unusually rich, varied and profound. He knows whereof he speaks, and no one who knows—no lawyer, doctor, man or woman of affairs, who has plunged to the deeps of modern society and who does not gloss over what he sees—could call *Spoon River* "brutal," or say that its author "sees life through the medium of sex." And to us, who long ago noted the "flaming idealism" of this poet, it seems strange indeed to find Miss Lowell including him among the "professed realists" who "are apt to forget that idealism, a perception of beauty, an aspiration after fineness and nobleness, are also real." In the study of Carl Sandburg there is less to criticize; in fact, this section and the one on Robert Frost are in my opinion the best of the book—for I find Robinson somewhat overstressed.

Miss Lowell on Tendencies

The final chapter—the one on the imagists, with H. D. and John Gould Fletcher as American exemplars—we must again criticize as incomplete, considered as a study of present-day radical symbolism, to speak broadly, in this country. If Miss Lowell were not the author we might begin by objecting to the omission of her own name. If the imagists fairly represented the whole story, we might further specify Ezra Pound, whose work, whether always strictly bounded by the tenets of imagism or not, has been immensely fecund—as Carl Sandburg pointed out long ago in *POETRY*—and certainly represents a tendency.

But the imagists are by no means the whole story. The delicate and whimsical art of Wallace Stevens, for example, art too individual to be listed under any school, is yet extremely significant. The spiritual vision of Cloyd Head also represents more than a passing or personal phase. Nor can anyone safely omit the fascinating experiments in moods and rhythms of Alfred Kreymborg, T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Helen Hoyt and others. All these demand consideration as representing a tendency of which the imagists are only one element.

The truth is that American poetry today is a rather large democracy. Mr. Stuart Walker, director of the adventurous Portmanteau Theatre, gives a lecture entitled *Every Little Theatre has a Movement all its Own*. So in the poetic movement also it is unsafe to select special groups, and set metes and bounds, for every American poet has a movement all his own. One may recognize that a widespread

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renaissance is certainly in process, one may study its multi-form manifestations, but whither it is leading us, and who will emerge as the leaders, it is much too early to say.

Meantime we may welcome Miss Lowell's book as important in the discussion. No one can fail to be thrilled by the six portraits it exhibits, records of singularly typical American lives: Robinson isolate, contemplative, sternly observant; Frost the Yankee, "plastic and passive," wandering but always drawn back to his own place; Masters, son of the "middle border," richly impassioned in life as in art; Sandburg, the northern offshoot powerful in growth, tender in bloom, under our bluer sky; H. D., shy and sensitive pilgrim of beauty; and John Gould Fletcher, American by in-born passion, cosmopolite by training and taste, a brooding and melancholy seer of visions. Could any six characters, six lives, be more representative than these of our far-flung nation of many bloods and creeds?

Miss Lowell paints these portraits in vivid colors. If we think her book rather six portraits than a single complete composition, if we find its title too general for its content, it is at any rate a big gun for a certain point of view. The danger is that the public will think it covers the whole subject, will be too ready to accept it as final and authoritative. And to admit this danger is to admit the author's power and repute both as poet and critic. *H. M.*